

Pets May Be Good For You

Not all medicine comes from your drug store. Sometimes it's sitting in your local pound - complete with floppy ears and a fuzzy tail.

The health benefits of pets are gaining increasing attention. Those who share their life and love with a pet get back a lot of rewards, says Dotti Bernhard, former chairperson of The Healing Power of Animals for the City of Los Angeles.

Many of us know about dogs that are trained to help people who have various disabilities. Even ordinary pets, however, can benefit people.

They help bring a sense of purpose to our lives - caring about and providing for a living creature. They can also bring more concrete benefits. Bernhard - of Berkley Convalescent Hospitals, which contract with Kaiser Permanente to provide skilled nursing care - has developed a program that brings birds into the lives of nursing home residents. Residents prepare food and make toys for the birds. In addition, the presence of the birds motivates residents and encourages them to participate in physical, occupational, and speech therapy sessions, Bernhard says.

Pets have also been credited with reducing stress, lowering blood pressure, improving recovery from heart attacks, and decreasing doctor visits of older adults.

Researchers suggest that pets may bring humor into our lives and offer companionship and affection.

Pets aren't for everyone, however. Some people may not want the responsibility and work that comes with a pet.